Oscar Wilde and T. E. Hulme

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1

An expurgated edition of Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis* first appeared in 1905, five years after the author's lonely death in a Paris hotel, and had so quick a sale that it went through as many as five editions within a year. And three years later, in 1908, the first collected works of Wilde were published in the thirteen beautifully bound volumes to earn him a chance for his literary works to be evaluated in a new light.

About that time T. E. Hulme, who had been sent down from Cambridge University before completing his study, was roaming from place to place, with intermittent but rather long stays in London and Cambridge mainly to attend lectures on philosophy. And at last in 1908 he settled in London, helping to organize "The Poets' Club" as secretary and preparing himself for his debut as a literary and philosophical contributor to magazines such as *The New Age* and *The Cambridge Magazine.*

A few biographical or chronological facts about Wilde and Hulme which have been shown above are suggestive enough to lead us to expect that Hulme may have read Wilde and made some comments on his works. And there is an additional fact that Hulme met Robert Ross, Wilde's literary executor and editor of the first edition of *De Profundis,* at a Poets' Club dinner in 1908,[1] the very year of the publication of the first collected works of Wilde under the editorship of Ross himself. In fact we have an example, a single one in almost all of his writings, where Hulme refers to Wilde particularly:

> Jules de Gaultier's philosophy is a sign of the times. Taken together with that of Boutroux, Bergson, Le Roy and many others, it is a sign that the centre of interest in philosophy has shifted from Germany to France. The particular characteristic of this movement that first strikes one is the great success of lucidity it has brought. Wilde once asserted that he was the first philosopher to dress like a gentleman. But, unfortunately for this very desirable claim, he was no philoso-

> pher. These Frenchmen, on the contrary, while they write like gentlemen and not like pedants, at the same time write metaphysics of a very subtle and distinguished kind.[2]

This passage is from the third chapter of "Searchers after Reality" published in the December 2nd, 1909 issue of *The New Age*. By a "gentleman" Hulme means an author who can write "in a charmingly lucid manner, with great literary distinction," but it is not clear from this comment alone whether Hulme takes Wilde to be one of the "gentlemen"; he may be only alluding to Wilde's famous or notorious "aesthetic costume" mockingly. One thing, however, is evident: Hulme denies Wilde's claim to a "philosopher."[3]

Many attempts have been made to evaluate their achievements from specific points of view. Among them, the most relevant study to our subject is Earl Miner's *The Japanese Tradition in British and American Literature*, in which the author proves an affinity between the Impressionistic poems of Wilde and the Imagist poems of Hulme, and says that if Wilde could have developed his poetics "he would in all probability be regarded with T. E. Hulme as one of the founders of modern poetry."[4] And what I intend to do in the present paper is to point out a little piece of fact which will be helpful to illuminate Hulme's criticism of the romanticist Wilde.

2

Hulme's essay on "Humanism and the Religious Attitude," published as a series in *The New Age* between 1915 and 1916, presents some views characteristic of the author. Apparently he intended to expound some of the subjects in it to the full later on, but he was not allowed time to realize his intention because of his service in the First World War and his grievous death in 1917.

In "A Programme" of the unfinished essay, having examined "the two opposed conceptions of the nature of man," he writes:

> The moderns, whether philosophers or reformers, make constant appeals to certain ideals, which they assume everybody will admit as natural and inevitable for the emancipated man. What these are you may discover from peroration of speeches – even from scrap books. "To thine own true self, etc. . . . Over the portal of the new world, *Be Thyself* shall be written. . . . Culture is not satisfied till we all come to a perfect man. . . . the free growth of personality" – so on.[5]

We absorb these ideals unconsciously, Hulme argues, "from the humanist tradition which moulds the actual apparatus of our thought."

Although Hulme does not indicate the source or sources of the contents of the "scrap books," I believe that at least a part of the quotation, "Over the portal of the new world, *Be Thyself* shall be written," comes from Wilde's essay on "The Soul of Man under Socialism." Wilde writes:

> 'Know Thyself' was written over the portal of the antique world. Over the portal of the new world, 'Be Thyself' shall be written. And the message of Christ to man was simply 'Be Thyself.' That is the secret of Christ.[6]

Hulme's quotation is slightly altered, or different from the text of the first collected works of Wilde, in the use of italics instead of a pair of quotation marks, and yet evidently identical are the two sentences containing "Be Thyself."

The words corresponding exactly to the rest of the previous quotation by Hulme cannot be found out anywhere in Wilde's "The Soul of Man" and other writings, but while reading him we often come across similar phrases which illustrate that he believes in "thine own true self," "a perfect man" and "the free growth of personality." Whether these unidentified phrases come from Wilde or not, we can safely affirm, at least, that Wilde proves to be a target of Hulme's criticism of romanticism, together with all the other writers who base their positions on what Hulme calls romanticism.

3

Wilde published "The Soul of Man under Socialism" in 1890. As the title suggests, this rather naïve essay is not so much concerned with a particular way of establishing socialism as with an enthusiastic praise of Wildean individualism, the main purpose of which is to attain "the full development of Life to its highest mode of perfection."[7] It reveals the points of his views on man and the world all the better because it is not well-balanced in composition and he is most innocent in his way of asserting his conviction. He writes:

> The only thing that one really knows about human nature is that it changes. Change is the one quality we can predicate of it. The systems that fail are those that rely on the permanency of human nature, and not on its growth and development.[8]

And individualism, Wilde adds, "comes naturally and inevitably out of man," and therefore does not attempt to exercise any compulsion over man.

> On the contrary, it says to man that he should suffer no compulsion to be exercised over him. It does not try to force people to be good. It knows that people are good when they are let alone. Man will

develop Individualism out of himself.[9]

We are thus given almost all the principal conceptions which Wilde forms of man: the fluidity and changeableness of human nature, the innate goodness of man, and the rejection of any compulsion and authority over man. From these conceptions is deduced "the full realisation of his own personality" as the principal purpose of life, and that is exactly what the motto "*Be Thyself*" over the portal of the new world of Wilde means.

Wilde, who was sentenced to two year's hard labour in May, 1895, wrote an unbelievably long letter to a friend of his towards the end of his imprisonment. The expurgated edition of *De Profundis* is, as is well known, a compilation by Robert Ross of "a manuscript of eighty close-written pages on twenty folio sheets."[10] From the depths of the gaol, and in "absolute humility," as he says, he declares:

> I am far more of an Individualist than I ever was. Nothing seems to me of the smallest value except what one gets out of oneself. My nature is seeking a fresh mode of self-realisation. That is all I am concerned with.[11]

Here we see the strong and strenuous individualist Wilde announcing proudly his *vita nuova* saturated with further intensified individualism; and now an ideal type of his new mode of life is Christ, whom Wilde describes as follows:

> He felt that life was changeful, fluid, active, and that to allow it to be stereotyped into any form was death.[12]

And he:

> had no patience with the dull lifeless mechanical systems that treat people as if they were things, and so treat everybody alike: for him there were no laws: there were exceptions merely, as if anybody, or anything, for that matter, was like aught else in the world![13]

It is above me, and perhaps irrelevant to our discussion now, to comment on the image of Christ which Wilde presents in *De Profundis* and, earlier on, in "The Soul of Man." What should be noticed here are, first, that in spite of the miserable and intolerable experience in the gaol Wilde remains as he ever was, without being shattered in his principle, or he is intensifying his personality, as I should say, all the better for the painful experience there against his will; and, secondly, that Wilde seems to feel a sort of affinity with Christ whom he takes for "that close union of personality with perfection" or "the precursor of the romantic movement in life."[14] In *De Profundis* Wilde is talking louder and more eloquently than in "The Soul of Man."

The complete edition of *De Profundis*, which was published as late as 1962, reveals his secret intention to compare himself to his image of Christ; we

are thus given a more comprehensive picture of Wilde than Hulme could have. However, it must have been clear to Hulme, who could only read the expurgated edition, that what Wilde calls the romantic movement is going to devour religion and that Wilde will not cease to hold his belief in the perfect personality of man.

T. E. Hulme, on the contrary, criticizes romanticism severely both in "Humanism and the Religious Attitude," an essay placed at the opening of *Speculations* by the editor Herbert Read, and in "Romanticism and Classicism." Almost all the philosophers since the Renaissance, he asserts, have "a family resemblance" in their personal view on the relation of man to the world: they are apt to re-construct the world in their minds in such a way as its image should satisfy themselves who are the measure of the world. And Hulme assumes:

> The whole subject has been confused by the failure to recognise the *gap* between the regions of vital and human things, and that of the *absolute* values of ethics and religion. We introduce into human things the *Perfection* that properly belongs only to the divine, and thus confuse both human and divine things by not clearly separating them.[15]

A main characteristic of romanticism is, for Hulme, the conceit of man who has an illusion that he contains perfection in his being.

In Hulme's view, which is under the influence of Pascal's *Pensées*,[16] reality is divided into three regions: the inorganic world, the organic world, and the world of ethical and religious values; and there must be an absolute division or a real discontinuity between each of the three regions. Romanticism, therefore, should be blamed for neglecting to pay due attention to the gaps or chasms in reality. Yet romanticism, unaware of its own fault, implants perfection in man and gives rise to "that bastard thing Personality, and all the bunkum that follows from it"[17]; life at its intensest becomes the divine, and disbelief in God leads to the conceited conviction that man is a god. "Romanticism then, and this is the best definition I can give of it, is spilt religion."[18]

Underlying all this criticism is Hulme's conviction that man is an animal doomed to live within his own limitations and is fixed in that he cannot choose but believe in the Deity:

> In the light of these absolute values [of religion and ethics], man himself is judged to be essentially limited and imperfect. He is endowed with Original Sin. While he can occasionally accomplish acts which partake of perfection, he can never himself *be* perfect.[19]

And Hulme goes on to say that "a man is essentially bad, he can only accom-

plish anything of value by discipline – ethical and political." From this religious attitude of his own does Hulme deduce the importance of tradition and institutions.

Here a question can be raised about what makes it possible for Hulme to take such a rigid and austere position in his views on man and the world, for which he is often blamed severely.[20] One of the main reasons for his austerity seems to me to lie in his use of the strict dichotomy, as is often the case with him. In "Romanticism and Classicism," after having explained his use of the word "romanticism," Hulme presents his own definition of the classical attitude, which he takes to be equivalent to the religious attitude: "one can define the classical quite clearly as the exact opposite to this [=romanticism]."[21] Hulme's intentional confrontation with romanticism thus deprives the classical or religious attitude of even a shade of romanticism.

This characteristic dichotomy in his method is most significantly exemplified in his dealing with his own feeling. In "Humanism and the Religious Attitude" he declares his position that he sees very little value in the sentiments attaching to the religious attitude, and goes so far as to say that he "may possibly swallow the sentiment for the sake of the dogma" [22] of Original Sin. The passage quoted below, which comes after his conditional approval of humanism "in a more heroic form," reveals his deliberate rejection of a certain element of his sensibility:

> I do not deny that humanism of this kind has a certain attraction. But it deserves no admiration, for it bears in itself the seed which is bound inevitably later to develop into sentimental, utilitarian romanticism. Such humanism could have no permanence.[23]

The sentiment is not identical with the feeling, and yet the above passage shows us the quality of his reasoning which proceeds with little consideration for the feeling or the sentiment. Apparently, however, Hulme is well conscious of the rigidity of his method, and it is perhaps with the purpose of refuting the conceited romanticism that he forces himself to take such a thoroughly rejective position towards romanticism.

Hulme's criticism of romanticism is not directed solely against Wilde.[24] Yet, as we have surveyed, there is a striking contrast between the ideas of Wilde and those of Hulme on man and the world, and the fact that Hulme quotes a part of Wilde's writings in the negative context, even though without giving his name explicitly, shows obviously that Hulme considers Wilde as a target for his criticism. And, in fact, Hulme tries to refute the conception of the perfect personality of man on which is based the whole "philosophy" of Wilde.

4

In July 1906 Hulme went over to Canada. Because he talks little about his visit there, as he often does with his private affairs, we know virtually nothing about it except a few impressions of his which some of the short, fragmentary comments in his writings show us. Yet they prove to be pivotal because they help us to understand the basis of his ideas on man and the world. "This realisation of the *tragic* significance of life," "the trivial and accidental characteristics of living shapes," man as "a wretched creature," "a feeling of separation in the face of the outside world," "disharmony or separation between man and nature"[25] – these words seem to suggest of what quality Hulme's experience in Canada was. Probably he felt so overwhelmed with the impressions there that he may have been led to disbelieve in the perfection of man and "that bastard thing Personality." I agree with A. R. Jones that "in Canada he began to see more clearly those relations between man and his environment, man and his art, and man and his God, the definitions of which were to occupy his attentions for the rest of his life."[26] Here is another passage from "Humanism and the Religious Attitude":

> Certain regions of reality differ not relatively but absolutely. There exists between them a real discontinuity. As the mind looks on discontinuity with horror it has attempted to exhibit these opposed things as differing only in degree, as if there is in reality a continuous scale leading from one to the other. From this springs a whole mass of confused thinking in religion and ethics. If we first of all form a clear conception of the nature of a discontinuity, of a chasm, and form in ourselves the temper of mind which can support this opposition without irritation, we shall then have in our hands an instrument which may shatter all this confused thinking, and enable us to form accurate ideas on these subjects. In this way a flood of light may be thrown on old controversies.[27]

Hulme writes this both as a refutation of "the principle of *continuity*"[28] which seems to Hulme to have prevailed in the nineteenth century, and as a method after which he is going to work out his own ideas on the religious attitude. And, if we take note of such words of psychological nature as "horror" and "irritation," the passage quoted above begins to reflect a personal voice of Hulme spouting out from the depths of his experience in Canada. At the same time we understand the reason why Hulme claims that what he has to say about the religious attitude should be regarded "merely as a prolegomena to

the reading of Pascal,"[29] who believes in the pure nothingness of the finite when they are placed in the face of the infinite or God.[30]

To turn back to Wilde now for the purpose of comparing him with Hulme in their attitudes towards nature. In an essay in dialogue, "The Decay of Lying," Wilde makes Vivian, a personage, speak for the author:

> If Nature had been comfortable, mankind would never have invented architecture, and I prefer houses to the open air. In a house we all feel of the proper proportions. Everything is subordinated to us, fashioned for our use and our pleasure. Egotism itself, which is so necessary to a proper sense of human dignity, is entirely the result of indoor life. Out of doors one becomes abstract and impersonal. One's individuality absolutely leaves one. And then Nature is so indifferent, so unappreciative.[31]

For Vivian, and for Wilde, too, nature is nothing but "the collection of phenomena external to man" and "people only discover in her what they bring to her. She [=Nature] has no suggestions of her own." Nature is no more than what man creates out of his imagination. It is only in terms of beauty, needless to say, that Wilde holds such an idealistic position on our perception and yet attention should be paid to Vivian's fear of losing his individuality out of doors. To assert, on the one hand, that nature is a creation of imagination and, on the other, that she makes man "abstract and impersonal" out of doors is one of Wilde's seeming contradictions. It should be noted here that he is well aware of the dangerous force of nature which can annihilate the personality of man at any moment, and that his consciousness of frailty may make him strive to establish himself in the comfortable space indoors, finding support in egotism "which is so necessary to a proper sense of human dignity." A logical extension of this posture is his absolute belief in artificiality and admiration of the personality of the artist, an ideal type of man. When Wilde declares that:

> The only portraits in which one believes are portraits where there is very little of the sitter, and a very great deal of the artist. Holbein's drawings of the men and women of his time impress us with a sense of their absolute reality. But this is simply because Holbein compelled life to accept his conditions, to restrain itself within his limitations, to reproduce his type, and to appear as he wished it to appear. It is style that makes us believe in a thing – nothing but style.[32]

his glorification of the personality is at its height. "No great artist," he claims triumphantly, "ever sees things as they really are. If he did, he would cease to be an artist."[33]

For Hulme, who has realized the absolute discontinuities between man

and nature, and between man and the divine to the utmost extent, "man is the chaos highly organised, but liable to revert to chaos at any moment."[34] He is placed completely naked among the realities, and should stare fixedly at the harshness of surroundings without looking through any "pseudo-categories" which can protect him from the onslaughts of reality with their vagueness; he must thus realize the necessity of re-establishing "the temper or disposition of mind which can look at a *gap* or chasm without shuddering."[35] Hulme's conception of humanity is best illustrated in the following passage which explains the mentality as well as the process of artistic creation of the people who live "in face of the varied confusion and arbitrariness of existence":

> In the reproduction [in art] of natural objects there is an attempt to purify them of their characteristically living qualities in order to make them necessary and immovable. The changing is translated into something fixed and necessary. This leads to rigid lines and dead crystalline forms, for pure geometrical regularity gives a certain pleasure to men troubled by the obscurity of outside appearance. The geometrical line is something absolutely distinct from the messiness, the confusion, and the accidental details of existing things.[36]

His proclamation of the value of "something fixed and necessary" and "pure geometrical regularity" is the very essence of his aesthetics.

Hulme seems to me to have much in common with Wilde in his negation of rude realism; art should belong to quite a different order from reality. However, as for the way he realizes his ideal of beauty, and of man, he presents a sharp contrast with Wilde. Wilde believes in the spontaneity and perfection of the personality of man, which is the only valid basis for our perception and artistic creation, while Hulme believes in the fixity and constancy of the abstract order instead of the individual. The contrast makes it inevitable for Hulme to criticize the romanticist Wilde, though he does not mention his name; and besides, it helps to exemplify significantly an aspect of a change of sensibility in aesthetics, as well as in ethics, about the turn of the century.

Notes:

1) Alun R. Jones, *The Life and Opinions of T. E. Hulme* (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1960), pp. 93-4.
2) T. E. Hulme, *Further Speculations,* ed. Sam Hynes (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955), p. 15.
3) The question whether Wilde is a "philosopher" or not may sound to us to be a queer one, but it was not so rarely discussed about the time of the

publication of *De Profundis* as now imagined. See the essays by E. V. Lucas, Max Beerbohm, and R. B. Cunninghame Graham in *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage,* ed. Karl Beckson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970). It is a matter of regret that I have not yet found out where "Wilde once asserted that he was the first philosopher to dress like a gentleman."

4) Earl Miner, *The Japanese Tradition in British and American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), p. 87. Herbert Read in *The True Voice of Feeling* (1947) and Frank Kermode in *Romantic Image* (1957), for example, also discuss Wilde and Hulme along with other poets from their respective critical points of view.
5) T. E. Hulme, *Speculations,* ed. Herbert Read (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1924), p. 61.
6) Oscar Wilde, "The Soul of Man under Socialism," *The Collected Edition,* ed. Robert Ross (London: Methuen and Co., 1908), p. 288.
7) *ibid.*, p. 276.
8) *ibid.*, p. 326.
9) *ibid.*, p. 327.
10) Robert Ross, "A Prefatory Dedication" to Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis* (London: Methuen and Co., 1908), p. xiii.
11) Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis,* p. 50.
12) *ibid.*, p. 117.
13) *ibid.*, pp. 118-9.
14) *ibid.*, p. 86 and p. 116.
15) T. E. Hulme, *Speculations,* pp. 32-3.
16) Although Hulme's referring to Pascal's *Pensées* is not always specific, his division of reality into three regions is said to be inspired by Fragment 793 (Brunschvig edition).
17) T. E. Hulme, *Speculations,* p. 33.
18) *ibid.*, p. 118.
19) *ibid.*, p. 47.
20) Hulme is often criticized for his political posture and his characteristic understanding of Christianity. The good criticisms of them are found in Michael Roberts, *T. E. Hulme* (1938: rpt. New York: Haskell House Publishers, Ltd., 1971), Sam Hynes' "Introduction" to *Further Speculations,* and Alun R. Jones, *The Life and Opinions of T. E. Hulme.* To be sure, his understanding of Pascal, for example, can not be said well-balanced, for Christ's mercy towards man is utterly neglected. However, if Hulme had been allowed time to expound his opinions fully, he would

have accomplished his proportionate explication of Pascal.

21) T. E. Hulme, *Speculations*, p. 116.
22) *ibid.*, p. 71.
23) *ibid.*, p. 62.
24) Edmund Husserl, for example, is included among philosophers whose ideas on man are "romantic," though Hulme speaks very highly of his "scientific philosophy."
25) T. E. Hulme, *Speculations*, p. 9 (also p. 53), p. 34, p. 71, p. 85, and p. 87.
26) A.R. Jones, *The Life and Opinions of T. E. Hulme*, pp. 23-4.
27) T. E. Hulme, *Speculations*, pp. 4-5.
28) *ibid.*, p. 3.
29) *ibid.*, pp. 56-7.
30) Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, Fragment 72.
31) Oscar Wilde, "The Deacay of Lying," *Intentions*, pp.4-5.
32) *ibid.*, pp. 49-50.
33) *ibid.*, p. 47.
34) T. E. Hulme, *Speculations*, pp. 227.
35) *ibid.*, p. 4.
36) *ibid.*, pp. 86-7.

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